

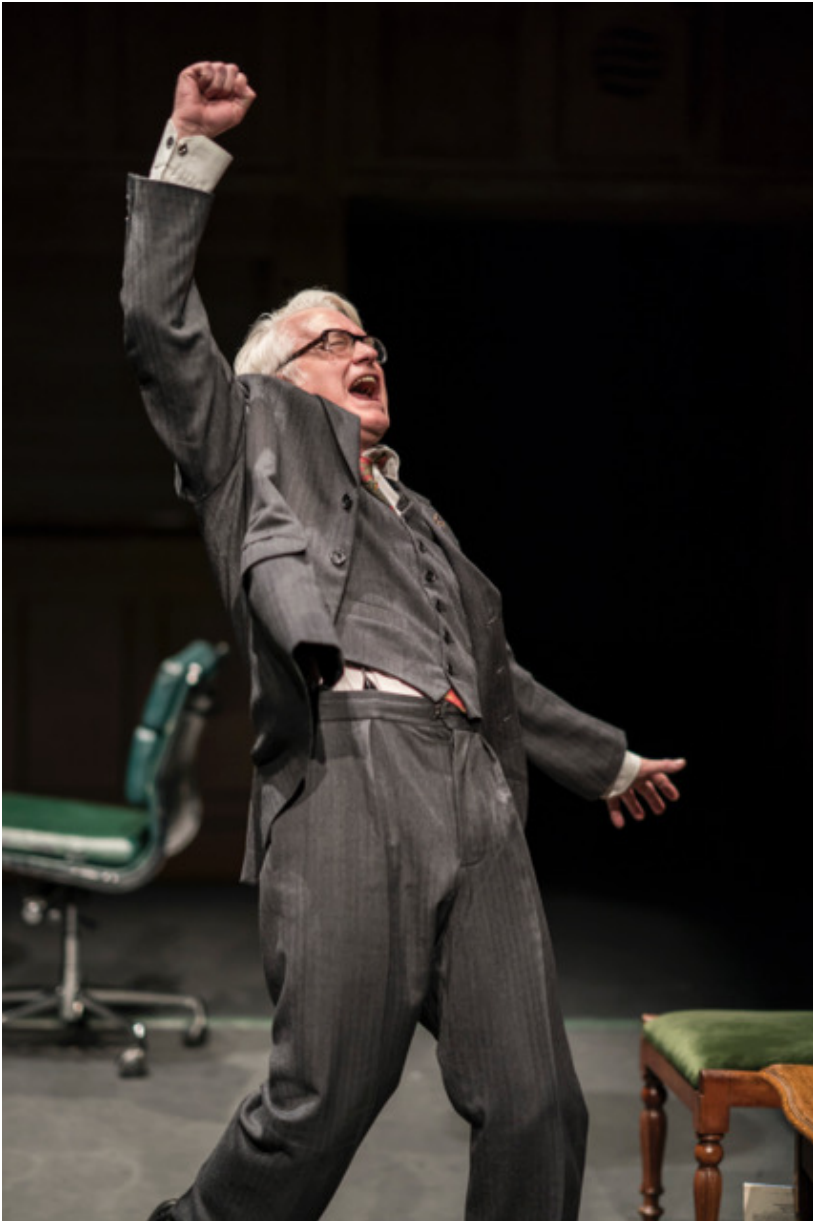
Theatre – This House, Festival Theatre ****



A week is a long time in politics: an adage that needs qualifying with the ever prescient caveat – the weak do not remain a long time in politics.

Clearly written in 2016 for its revival, Sir Nick Clegg's erudite programme commentary titled, *Echo Chamber*, reflects on the tempestuous years the play covers from 1974/79 – '*the Parliamentary insecurity of Harold Wilson's Government, operating without a working majority, stands in stark contrast to Theresa May's unassailable grip on power, notwithstanding her small majority.*'

Times move on with capricious hubris do they not, Sir Nick? Writer, James Graham's fictionally nuanced and incendiary enhanced reality take on mid-late 70s parliamentary horse-trading where the casualty rate was knackers-yard attritional ferments with seething back-door deals and back-stabbing Machiavellian joy.



THIS HOUSE David Hounslow Credit: Johan Persson – www.perssonphotography.com /

Director, Jeremy Herrin and Designer, Jonathan O'Boyle are in perfect tandem creating a stage space dynamic where the endlessly versatile ensemble cast become two households, both alike in indignity going for the Opposition's jugular with turbine-speed, testosterone-charged tantrum fanaticism.

Sort of House Of Card (Francis Urquhart vintage if you please) meets Sir Alan B'stard via Spitting Image. The role of Speaker, part universal Everyman collective conscience, part rollicking MC, announces the character-shifting cast by their formal address, the Right Honourable so and so. The setting

focuses on the two Chief Whips' offices and the debating chamber – transitions are lent intelligently crafted physicality through Paule Constable's lighting. An enormous Big Ben clock face looms above while a guitar band plays from the gallery. Hardly surprising they will riff in to *Anarchy In The UK* as another hung Parliament is hoisted by its own petard. Even the Westminster clock gives up the ghost – a spring has failed – too much tension apparently.

Amidst the medieval pomp and protocols Labour and Conservative machinations and manipulations, compromises and betrayals are pitched in to a seething cauldron of guile and gamesmanship. Inevitably, tonight's audience focus on contemporary parallels/portents through a jaundiced-tinted cracked prism of Brexit. There are plenty to choose from – once dormant land-mines just waiting to be stamped on.



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For many tonight who lived through these fractured events, names both infamous and influential, stir tumbleweed memories. Enraged, leonine, Michael Heseltine, taking up the ceremonial Mace. Disgraced John Stonehouse's connived beach disappearance. A shudder ripples through the audience when the

provenance of the British Leyland Austin 'Aggro' Allegro echoes as a salutary microcosm of a nation sick at heart.

Event driven tragi-comical, hyper-farcical in its grotesque intensity – MPs are stretchered in to the Division chambers as every vote becomes literally a life and death climax. Whether driven by ideology or pragmatism, compromising principles for power, the characters remain ever vivid and empathically real.

So many outstanding performances abound preclude any individual mention – though opposing Whips, Martin Marquez as Labour Bob Mellish, with the Tory suited-smoothie, Matthew Pidgeon as Jack Weatherill, epitomise both the bear-pit intensity together with a mutuality of dedication, loyalty and honour.

A play celebrating of the best and the worst of times where political passion, vulnerability and eccentricity contrast with contemporary media-savvy manipulation, ideological conceit and dishonesty. Refreshingly, not a single Prime Minister to be seen. Toxic HP Sauce to be relished. 'Democracy,' wryly observes Tory Whip, Humphrey Atkins, the excellent William Chubb, 'is one of the few things this country has successfully exported that hasn't been sent back!'



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